Intensive Reading: Getting Your Students to See the Forest as well as the Trees

By Zhang Zhenyu

In Chinese colleges and universities, two compulsory reading courses are offered simultaneously for English language majors: Intensive Reading (IR) and Extensive Reading (ER). The former, as its name suggests, requires students to read a passage (often called a "text") very carefully and in great detail. In an IR class, the teacher usually guides his/her students through a text slowly, explaining new words and phrases as s/he goes, and analyzing the grammatical structure if necessary, always making sure that the students understand every sentence in the text. ER on the other hand, aims at improving students' reading skills and communicative competency. An ER teacher often encourages students to read as much and as fast as they can so long as they are able to grasp the main idea of what they are reading.

A Long-standing Controversy

For a very long period of time, IR remained the dominant course in the nation's school syllabus-taking up a high percentage of class hours each week. It was both highly-valued and well-received by the students. But in the past two decades, especially since the spread of the communicative approach in language teaching, the role of IR in language teaching has been challenged, as people have begun to re-evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the two directions from a new theoretical perspective. In recent years, it has become such a controversial issue in the English language teaching (ELT) field that one can hardly open a Chinese ELT academic publication without reading some controversial articles on the topic.

Some people believe that IR goes against the laws and objectives of language learning because it is word- or sentence-centered. Students who analyze the surface meaning of individual words and sentences, while reading the passage will inevitably miss the logical meaning and cultural content conveyed. Of all the charges brought against IR classes, the most typical and frequently used is that it makes students "miss seeing the forest for the trees." Some have even asserted that IR is not really reading at all.

On the other hand, IR is not without advocates who are convinced that the major difference between Chinese and English, which also poses the greatest difficulty for Chinese students, lies at the lexical and syntactic level, rather than at the textual level. Proponents of this view believe that greater efforts should be made to give students a solid foundation in the target language, focussing on its vocabulary, grammar, idiomatic usages, sentence structure, etc., instead of spending a lot of time and effort teaching reading skills which are universally found in most languages and constitute little, if any, difficulty for Chinese students of English language.

Despite this theoretical dispute, people on both sides have begun to look at things more objectively. They all agree that the relationship between the "trees" and the "forest" is one which is mutually beneficial and complementary. A good command of the meaning of individual sentences will help the students grasp the general meaning of the passage as a whole. Correct comprehension of the main idea of a text will in turn assist the students greatly with their understanding of each sentence in the reading selection.

As a teacher of English, who has been teaching IR for more than fourteen years, I find it hard to go along with the views which devalue the role of IR in English teaching and learning. But at the same time I do feel the need for IR teachers to revise and improve their teaching methods and procedures so as to come up with a better teaching approach-an approach that will help students "see both the trees and the forest."

Two Stages of Learning to Read

It is beyond any doubt that the ultimate objective of reading is to obtain information from what is being read. When talking about reading, however, people should always keep in mind that one must have a fairly good command of the language itself before s/he can read anything at all in that language. As English and Chinese belong to two totally different language families, the learning process certainly takes a great amount of time and effort on the part of the learner.

At the first stage of this process, the aim of the students' reading activities is to learn to decipher the messages conveyed in a sentence-something learners see as a jumble of linguistic symbols arranged in an order quite different from that in their mother tongue. Students need a course that will provide them with good and solid training on the basics of the language-its pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, idiomatic usage, etc. Therefore, it is only proper and natural for the teacher to conduct IR classes in a sentence-centered approach and to focus on teaching the interrelationships between various sentence components. This is the stage when the student reads for language acquisition so as to "become literate."

As students progress with the basic elements of English language, they enter the second stage of the learning process-reading for the acquisition of information. By now, they should be able to read in the language with some ease, no longer overburdened by concentrating on identifying and analyzing words, phrases and sentence structures. In other words, learners are now in a position to devote part of their attention to the analysis of logical relations between sentences and paragraphs. While reading, students should learn to identify the main idea of each paragraph and to make a logical and reasonable judgment as to the writer's intended message.

From the above discussion, we may set forth the following concepts as guidelines for the teaching of an IR course:

- Language teaching is an organic process including two transitions: l.) from words to sentences (reading at the syntactical level) and 2.) from sentences to whole texts (reading at the textual level).

- The second transition is more significant in language teaching because it is this transition that enables the students to fulfill their ultimate goal of learning to read-to "see the forest."
- This second transition requires the teacher to make adjustments in his/her teaching focus and methods in accordance with the development of the students' linguistic competency.
- There is no clear line of demarcation between the two transitions; nor are there any hard and fast rules as to how to put them into effect. Each teacher needs to decide the best time and method for shifting from a sentence-centered approach to a text-centered approach.

Classroom Activities for Bringing the Forest into Focus

The IR course in itself does not prevent students from "seeing the forest"; it is how the teacher conducts the classes that makes the difference. In the following part of this article, I will discuss some of the classroom activities I often use with my second-year students in IR classes, with special emphasis on the styles of the texts used. I have found these activities applicable in most classroom situations and found them very beneficial for helping students learn to read at the textual level so as to "see the forest as well as the trees."

1. Pre-reading questions: Questions should not be used by the teacher only as a means of checking how well the students understand a passage they have just read. They can also be used to help students better understand the passage they are going to read. For example, in teaching a text entitled *World Trade* , I assign my students the following questions before they read the text: What are the reasons for foreign trade? What are the different forms of invisible trade? Why is it impossible for any nation to be self- sufficient? What countries are mentioned in the text? Why does the writer mention these countries?

Such pre-reading questions on the text often bring about amazing results because they increase the students' interest in the subject to be read and enable learners to read "with a purpose." Questions beginning with *When, Where, Who,* and *What* prompt students to look for specific information from the reading material while those with *Why* and *How* help them to probe more deeply into the information they have gained from the text.

To answer these questions, students have to tackle the text as an organic whole, sorting out messages and selecting and reorganizing those that they judge to be the most relevant and important to the questions they are going to answer. Here the passive reading process of input becomes an active process of output.

2. Finding topic sentences: Texts of argumentation are usually made up of several paragraphs. If a student knows the topic of each paragraph, s/he will have little or no trouble figuring out the overall meaning of the text. Since the main idea of a paragraph is often revealed by the topic sentence in a paragraph, the ability to identify topic sentences should be developed in order to read efficiently.

I have noticed that students usually have no problem with paragraphs where the topic sentence is the first sentence in the paragraph. However, if the topic sentence is placed in the middle or at the end of the paragraph, misconceptions often result. A paragraph in the same text, *World Trade*, illustrates this point very well.

The United States has been described as a nation of immigrants. Many Americans send money back to families and relatives in the "old country." In the past fifteen years, millions of workers from the countries of southern Europe have gone to work in Germany, Switzerland, France, the Benelux nations, and Scandinavia. The workers send money home to support their families. These are called immigrant remittances. They are an extremely important kind of invisible trade for some countries, both as imports and exports.

The first sentence makes students think that the writer is going to talk about the problem of immigration in the United States. By the time they reach the middle of the paragraph, students feel that it deals with the problem on a global scope. The last three sentences open another possibility: The writer seems to say that immigrant remittances are an important kind of invisible trade. To help the students out, I tell them to make judgments by looking at what is discussed in the previous and the following paragraphs.

Paragraphs like this one require special attention on the part of the teacher because they provide good material and an opportunity for students to learn to understand the paragraphs in a text. In other words, they teach the students to read at the textual level.

There have been a lot of papers and books published in recet years which discuss and teach paragraph reading skills such as finding discourse markers, identifying structural cohesion and textual coherence, discovering thematic connectivity, etc. Techniques of this kind are especially helpful when students work with texts of argumentation.

3. Outlining a story: With texts of narrative and descriptive writings, such as short stories and plays, where topic sentences are rarely provided directly by the writer, it is always good practice, immediately after a section of the story or scene in a play, to have the students write a sentence that can express the main idea. Let's take the beginning section of Richard Matheson's Button, Button as an example.

The package was lying by the front door-a cube-shaped carton box sealed with tape. Norma picked it up, unlocking the door, and went into the apartment. It was just getting dark. After she put the lamb chops in the broiler, she sat down to open the package.

Inside the carton was a push button unit fastened to a small wooden box. A glass dome covered the button. Norma tried to lift it off, but it was locked in place. She turned the unit over and saw a piece of paper taped to the bottom of the box: "Mr. Steward will call on you at 8:00 p.m." Norma put the button unit on the couch, and went back into the kitchen to make the salad.

The language is simple, but instead of moving on to the next part of the story, I ask my students to read it again and try to write a very brief sentence that expresses the most basic idea of what happened in this part of the story. They often come up with something like:

Norma found (picked up/received) a package.

Then I ask students to make it more informative by adding attributive and adverbial modifiers. This often brings the class to life as the students vie with each other to offer their suggestions. Eventually, by joint effort, they will expand the sentence into something like:

Returning home from work/shopping one afternoon, Norma found a package, which had a push button unit inside.

As students move on to the later sections, they will create more sentences, such as:

The man who sent the package called on Norma and told her that if she pushes the button, someone will die and she will get 50,000 dollars. Norma was interested but her husband thought it was immoral to murder someone for money.

These sentences form a good summary of the text, from which the students can always interpret the theme of the text much more easily than from a text four or five pages long.

4. Picking out key words: Comprehending a text does not mean memorizing all the details presented in the passage. Sometimes the text may contain so much detailed information that students are likely to get lost in a vast sea of data and facts. It is necessary for the teacher to develop the students' ability to synthesize the most important information, so that they can read more quickly and efficiently. The following is the first part of *Pompeii* , by Robert Silverberg:

Not very far from Naples, a strange city sleeps under the hot Italian sun. It is the city of Pompeii, and there is no other city quite like it in the world. Nothing lives in Pompeii except crickets and beetles and lizards, yet every year thousands of people travel from distant countries to visit it.

Pompeii is a dead city. No one has lived there for nearly two thousand years-not since the summer of the year A.D. 79, to be exact.

Until that year Pompeii was a prosperous city of 25,000 people. Nearby was the Bay of Naples, an arm of the blue Mediterranean. Rich men came from wealthy Rome to build seaside villas. Farmlands surrounded Pompeii. Rising behind the city was the 4,000 foot Mount Vesuvius, a grass covered slope where the shepherds of Pompeii took their goats to graze. Pompeii was a busy city and a happy one.

The passage above describes Pompeii yesterday and today. I have noticed that very often students fail to get a clear picture of the city although they perfectly understand what is expressed in each sentence. As a remedy, I ask them to reread the passage and find all the adjectives that the writer uses to describe the city. After they have picked out the words *strange, dead, prosperous, busy* , and *happy* , I ask them: Why does the writer call it a *strange (dead/prosperous/busy/ happy)* city? Once the students find answers to these questions, they usually have a thorough and accurate command of the important points of the paragraph.

The "key words" that the teacher asks the students to pick out can also be nouns, verbs, or even noun or verbal phrases. In teaching the next part of *Pompeii* , which recreates the horror of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and the destruction of the city, I first ask students to find all the noun phrases that show "the order in which the tragedy unfolds" (as shown in Figure 1 below). Then I ask them to read the same section again and look for words that tell of "the consequences resulting from each event listed in the column." As students report their findings, I put them on the blackboard one by one, on the right side of the first column.

The two columns provide the framework into which more details can be fitted by the students in their subsequent reading to make up the whole.

5. Post-reading discussions: It is always advisable for the teacher to organize a ten- to fifteen-minute discussion on the text after the whole passage has been covered. The discussion may include comments on the theme of the text, the organization of the paragraphs and the writing techniques of the writer. This is especially important with narrative and descriptive texts, in which the writer tells a story or recounts an event and then leaves it to the readers to figure out for themselves the message s/he intends to convey.

To initiate and then to guide the discussion, I usually set forth a few topics like:

What's the theme/moral of the text? How does the writer present his arguments in support of the theme? What linguistic devices does the writer use in the text?

The teacher should be aware that a discussion differs from a question and answer session in that students may have different opinions on the same topic. For example, the theme of *Button, Button* can be any of the following:

Money is the root of all evil. //One should never benefit himself at the expense of others. //Those who are selfish enough to harm others will harm themselves.

Conclusion

The course of Intensive Reading, with its special emphasis on the training of basic language skills, plays an important and indispensable role in the teaching of English to learners of beginning and intermediate levels; it can also help the advanced learners if an IR teacher adjusts his/her teaching methods and techniques in accordance with the learners' actual linguistic competency. There are always many things that a teacher can do to help the students see not only the trees but the forest as well.

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Figure 1

Events	Consequences
sound of explosion	frightened the Pompeiians
black cloud of smoke	darkened the sky
rain of pumice stones	did little damage
rain of hot ash	set fire to houses
earthquake	caused buildings to fall
poison gas	killed people by the thousands
descending ash	buried the city deep